

WOMEN - A CONTINUING SOURCE OF FARM LABOR

by
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Miss Fagin: In order to review this situation of women in farm labor during the past two years we had to know what the actual picture was and what we could expect in 1946. During 1945 the national placement of women amounted to 496,048 while in 1946 it jumped to 529,160 or an additional placement of 33,112 women. In the seventeen Western states, as represented at this meeting, the placements of women in 1945 amounted to 226,960 while for 1946 they dropped to 220,147 or a minus placement of 6,813. The increased number of women placed showed a trend that we did not expect which would indicate that in the future women would be a continuing force on the farms.

Why did these placements increase? The following reasons were given to the interviewers: In the Western coast states of California, Oregon and Washington women have always worked, mainly in fruit. This has been customary for many years. We also know that there was some return from industry of women to work on the farms. The economic situation was given for one reason why women were returning to farms from industry or why new ones were entering the picture. Because of the high cost of living, it was necessary for them to earn money. Another reason given was that they liked the work. They felt that it had a healthful aspect. There were some vacationers, particularly families with extra women, who during the war enjoyed the vacations they spent together and this accounted for some increase. There is also a tendency toward the packaging of certain vegetables, for which job women are particularly fitted. The packaging of spinach and salad mixes is becoming more prominent on the market which accounts for some increase in the use of women. There is also an increasing tendency for the formation of crews of workers who go to the office to be placed and the women sometimes outnumber the men two to one.

We also note that there are certain jobs for which women are particularly fitted: sorting, grading, cutting and picking. For work of these types, women will probably always be used as they are adapted to doing it, and they will be a continuing force. If they are to be a continuing source of farm labor, we should thoughtfully study and see if we can make them not only a continuing source but an increasingly successful force. What do these women do? They do all types of fruit work, work in hops, vegetables and run some machinery.

Who are these women? Forty to sixty percent of the women are from small towns, farms or from metropolitan areas. They are the farmer's wife, daughter or vacationers. A large portion of the seasonal workers are women who like the work. Other women come from migrant groups who go from place to place or are women who are regularly employed in farming work.

What are the problems involved? I shall discuss mainly the group of women from small towns, agricultural and metropolitan areas with which group of women I have worked. With the use of these women no great social or economic problems are involved as they live at home and work near home. However, there are certain problems that could be overcome to make women increasingly successful

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workers. One is the care of children. During the war years, in California, we made use of child care centers that were already operating. Others were set up with funds from the Farm Production Council, a State organization. These were also set up with Lanham Act funds. The child care centers were not only a help to the migrant workers but to the women on the farms. We would like to see the child care centers handled by communities, growers and parents. As these child care centers are set up and studied, we should get some factual data that would be helpful. The lack of child care centers is a limiting factor in getting women to come to the farms. The second point to consider is the improvement of working conditions for women. Working hours should not be made too long as most of the women are doing two jobs, at home and in the fields. Sanitary facilities should be improved. Modernization of equipment should be stressed. Safety measures should be employed.

The point to take under consideration is pay for women. They should be paid enough to pay for the extra help needed at home or for the care of children. By nature of the work for which women are suited, we often find they are put on low-paying jobs.

The final point for consideration is training. A training program is important both to the women and to the farmer. It is important to women mainly from the standpoint of pay and their ability to do the job in an easier way to prevent fatigue. It is important to the employer as the woman will be able to do more work and better work.

We should not try to promote a program to get women permanently into the field of agriculture. They are suitable for seasonal work and in doing this type of work they will enjoy it and will not have harmful effects from it.

For migrant women these points are intensified. In addition, medical care, housing and other things are important.

What can be learned from this program that we can apply and what should we more thoughtfully consider in the years ahead in the use of women in agriculture? Most Extension people should have a greater awareness of all groups of farm people. We have been spending a great deal of time on this in our Extension program in California. We are trying to get past the confusion of a changing population. We must find out how many are farm laborers, how many are returning veterans, how many are migrants. Certainly we should make our people more aware of the problems of all groups. We believe that it is just as important to help the returning veteran or the middle class farmer as it is the migrant. We have the same opportunities of home demonstration work with all groups. Our Home Demonstration Agents have worked with 4-H Clubs, returning veterans, women on farms and migrant women in a few counties in California. Friendly relationships are important, in getting along with people in our camps and even with groups of women who go out by the day to work.

Is there some way that Extension can help with these problems? There is need for more factual data relative to women working. We should study from a scientific basis and research basis the reason why they work, what is important to them, what they want, etc. We would like to hold day conferences for women who go out seasonally and let them discuss what they would like to see done to improve their working conditions. The Farm Labor staff should include women in counties and states where women will probably be a continuing source of labor. If they are to be a continuing source, we should do everything to make it satisfactory for them and for the employer as well.